



The Plague

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Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

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**T**he unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 194— at Oran. Everyone agreed that considering their somewhat extraordinary character, they were out of place there. For its ordinariness is what strikes one first about the town of Oran, which is merely a large French port on the Algerian coast, headquarters of the prefect of a French department.

The town itself, let us admit, is ugly. It has a smug, placid air and you need time to discover what it is that makes it different from so many business centers in other parts of the world. How to conjure up a picture, for instance, of a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens, where you never hear the beat of wings or the rustle of leaves—a thoroughly negative place, in short? The seasons are discriminated only in the sky. All that tells you of spring's coming is the feel of the air, or the baskets of flowers brought in from the suburbs by peddlers; it's a spring cried in the marketplaces. During the summer the sun bakes the houses bone-

dry, sprinkles our walls with grayish dust, and you have no option but to survive those days of fire indoors, behind closed shutters. In autumn, on the other hand, we have deluges of mud. Only winter brings really pleasant weather.

Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die. In our little town (is this, one wonders, an effect of the climate?) all three are done on much the same lines, with the same feverish yet casual air. The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits. Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, "doing business." Naturally they don't eschew such simpler pleasures as love-making, sea-bathing, going to the pictures. But, very sensibly, they reserve these pastimes for Saturday afternoons and Sundays and employ the rest of the week in making money, as much as possible. In the evening, on leaving the office, they forgather, at an hour that never varies, in the cafés, stroll the same boulevard, or take the air on their balconies. The passions of the young are violent and short-lived; the vices of older men seldom range beyond an addiction to bowling, to banquets and "socials," or clubs where large sums change hands on the fall of a card.

It will be said, no doubt, that these habits are not peculiar to our town; really all our contemporaries are much the same. Certainly nothing is commoner nowadays than to see people working from morn till night and then proceeding to fritter away at card-tables, in cafés and in small-talk what time is left for living. Nevertheless there still exist towns and countries where people have now and then an inkling of something different. In general it doesn't change their lives. Still, they have had an intimation, and that's so much to the good. Oran,

however, seems to be a town without intimations; in other words, completely modern. Hence I see no need to dwell on the manner of loving in our town. The men and women consume one another rapidly in what is called "the act of love," or else settle down to a mild habit of conjugality. We seldom find a mean between these extremes. That, too, is not exceptional. At Oran, as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have to love one another without knowing much about it.

What is more exceptional in our town is the difficulty one may experience there in dying. "Difficulty," perhaps, is not the right word; "discomfort" would come nearer. Being ill is never agreeable, but there are towns that stand by you, so to speak, when you are sick; in which you can, after a fashion, let yourself go. An invalid needs small attentions, he likes to have something to rely on, and that's natural enough. But at Oran the violent extremes of temperature, the exigencies of business, the uninspiring surroundings, the sudden nightfalls, and the very nature of its pleasures call for good health. An invalid feels out of it there. Think what it must be for a dying man, trapped behind hundreds of walls all sizzling with heat, while the whole population, sitting in cafés or hanging on the telephone, is discussing shipments, bills of lading, discounts! It will then be obvious what discomfort attends death, even modern death, when it waylays you under such conditions in a dry place.

These somewhat haphazard observations may give a fair idea of what our town is like. However, we must not exaggerate. Really, all that was to be conveyed was the banality of the town's appearance and of life in it. But you can get through the days there without trouble, once you have formed habits. And since habits are precisely what our town encourages, all is for the best. Viewed from this angle, its life

is not particularly exciting; that must be admitted. But, at least, social unrest is quite unknown among us. And our frank-spoken, amiable, and industrious citizens have always inspired a reasonable esteem in visitors. Treeless, glamourless, soulless, the town of Oran ends by seeming restful and, after a while, you go complacently to sleep there.

It is only fair to add that Oran is grafted on to a unique landscape, in the center of a bare plateau, ringed with luminous hills and above a perfectly shaped bay. All we may regret is the town's being so disposed that it turns its back on the bay, with the result that it's impossible to see the sea, you always have to go to look for it.

Such being the normal life of Oran, it will be easily understood that our fellow citizens had not the faintest reason to apprehend the incidents that took place in the spring of the year in question and were (as we subsequently realized) premonitory signs of the grave events we are to chronicle. To some, these events will seem quite natural; to others, all but incredible. But, obviously, a narrator cannot take account of these differences of outlook. His business is only to say: "This is what happened," when he knows that it actually did happen, that it closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eyewitnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes.

In any case the narrator (whose identity will be made known in due course) would have little claim to competence for a task like this, had not chance put him in the way of gathering much information, and had he not been, by the force of things, closely involved in all that he proposes to narrate. This is his justification for playing the part of a historian. Naturally, a historian, even an amateur, always has data, personal or at second hand, to guide him. The present narrator has three kinds of data: first, what he saw

himself; secondly, the accounts of other eyewitnesses (thanks to the part he played, he was enabled to learn their personal impressions from all those figuring in this chronicle); and, lastly, documents that subsequently came into his hands. He proposes to draw on these records whenever this seems desirable, and to employ them as he thinks best. He also proposes . . .

But perhaps the time has come to drop preliminaries and cautionary remarks and to launch into the narrative proper. The account of the first days needs giving in some detail.



When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing. On the spur of the moment he kicked it to one side and, without giving it a further thought, continued on his way downstairs. Only when he was stepping out into the street did it occur to him that a dead rat had no business to be on his landing, and he turned back to ask the concierge of the building to see to its removal. It was not until he noticed old M. Michel's reaction to the news that he realized the peculiar nature of his discovery. Personally, he had thought the presence of the dead rat rather odd, no more than that; the concierge, however, was genuinely outraged. On one point he was categorical: "There weren't no rats here." In vain the doctor assured him that there *was* a rat, presumably dead, on the second-floor landing; M. Michel's conviction wasn't

to be shaken. There "weren't no rats in the building," he repeated, so someone must have brought this one from outside. Some youngster trying to be funny, most likely.

That evening, when Dr. Rieux was standing in the entrance, feeling for the latch-key in his pocket before starting up the stairs to his apartment, he saw a big rat coming toward him from the dark end of the passage. It moved uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be trying to get its balance, moved forward again toward the doctor, halted again, then spun around on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a moment, the doctor went upstairs.

He wasn't thinking about the rat. That glimpse of spurting blood had switched his thoughts back to something that had been on his mind all day. His wife, who had been ill for a year now, was due to leave next day for a sanatorium in the mountains. He found her lying down in the bedroom, resting, as he had asked her to do, in view of the exhausting journey before her. She gave him a smile.

"Do you know, I'm feeling ever so much better!" she said.

The doctor gazed down at the face that turned toward him in the glow of the bedside lamp. His wife was thirty, and the long illness had left its mark on her face. Yet the thought that came to Rieux's mind as he gazed at her was:

How young she looks, almost like a little girl! But perhaps that was because of the smile, which effaced all else.

"Now try to sleep," he counseled. "The nurse is coming at eleven, you know, and you have to catch the midday train."

He kissed the slightly moist forehead. The smile escorted him to the door.

Next day, April 17, at eight o'clock the concierge but-



tonholed the doctor as he was going out. Some young scallywags, he said, had dumped three dead rats in the hall. They'd obviously been caught in traps with very strong springs, as they were bleeding profusely. The concierge had lingered in the doorway for quite a while, holding the rats by their legs and keeping a sharp eye on the passers-by, on the off chance that the miscreants would give themselves away by grinning or by some facetious remark. His watch had been in vain.

"But I'll nab 'em all right," said M. Michel hopefully.

Much puzzled, Rieux decided to begin his round in the outskirts of the town, where his poorer patients lived. The scavenging in these districts was done late in the morning and, as he drove his car along the straight, dusty streets, he cast glances at the garbage cans aligned along the edge of the sidewalk. In one street alone the doctor counted as many as a dozen rats deposited on the vegetable and other refuse in the cans.

He found his first patient, an asthma case of long standing, in bed, in a room that served as both dining-room and bedroom and overlooked the street. The invalid was an old Spaniard with a hard, rugged face. Placed on the coverlet in front of him were two pots containing dried peas. When the doctor entered, the old man was sitting up, bending his neck back, gasping and wheezing in his efforts to recover his breath. His wife brought a bowl of water.

"Well, Doctor," he said, while the injection was being made, "they're coming out, have you noticed?"

"The rats, he means," his wife explained. "The man next door found three."

"They're coming out, you can see them in all the trash cans. It's hunger!"

Rieux soon discovered that the rats were the great topic of conversation in that part of the town. After his round of visits he drove home.

"There's a telegram for you, sir, upstairs," M. Michel informed him.

The doctor asked him if he'd seen any more rats.

"No," the concierge replied, "there ain't been any more. I'm keeping a sharp lookout, you know. Those youngsters wouldn't dare when I'm around."

The telegram informed Rieux that his mother would be arriving next day. She was going to keep house for her son during his wife's absence. When the doctor entered his apartment he found the nurse already there. He looked at his wife. She was in a tailor-made suit, and he noticed that she had used rouge. He smiled to her.

"That's splendid," he said. "You're looking very nice."

A few minutes later he was seeing her into the sleeping-car. She glanced round the compartment.

"It's too expensive for us really, isn't it?"

"It had to be done," Rieux replied.

"What's this story about rats that's going round?"

"I can't explain it. It certainly is queer, but it'll pass."

Then hurriedly he begged her to forgive him; he felt he should have looked after her better, he'd been most remiss. When she shook her head, as if to make him stop, he added: "Anyhow, once you're back everything will be better. We'll make a fresh start."

"That's it!" Her eyes were sparkling. "Let's make a fresh start."

But then she turned her head and seemed to be gazing through the car window at the people on the platform, jostling one another in their haste. The hissing of the locomotive

reached their ears. Gently he called his wife's first name; when she looked round he saw her face wet with tears.

"Don't," he murmured.

Behind the tears the smile returned, a little tense. She drew a deep breath.

"Now off you go! Everything will be all right."

He took her in his arms, then stepped back on the platform. Now he could only see her smile through the window.

"Please, dear," he said, "take great care of yourself."

But she could not hear him.

As he was leaving the platform, near the exit he met M. Othon, the police magistrate, holding his small boy by the hand. The doctor asked him if he was going away.

Tall and dark, M. Othon had something of the air of what used to be called a man of the world, and something of an undertaker's assistant.

"No," the magistrate replied, "I've come to meet Madame Othon, who's been to present her respects to my family."

The engine whistled.

"These rats, now—" the magistrate began.

Rieux made a brief movement in the direction of the train, then turned back toward the exit.

"The rats?" he said. "It's nothing."

The only impression of that moment which, afterwards, he could recall was the passing of the railroadman with a box full of dead rats under his arm.

Early in the afternoon of that day, when his consultations were beginning, a young man called on Rieux. The doctor gathered that he had called before, in the morning, and was a journalist by profession. His name was Raymond Rambert. Short, square-shouldered, with a determined-looking face and keen, intelligent eyes, he gave the impression of someone who

could keep his end up in any circumstances. He wore a sports type of clothes. He came straight to the point. His newspaper, one of the leading Paris dailies, had commissioned him to make a report on the living conditions prevailing among the Arab population, and especially on the sanitary conditions.

Rieux replied that these conditions were not good. But, before he said any more, he wanted to know if the journalist would be allowed to tell the truth.

"Certainly," Rambert replied.

"I mean," Rieux explained, "would you be allowed to publish an unqualified condemnation of the present state of things?"

"Unqualified? Well, no, I couldn't go that far. But surely things aren't quite so bad as that?"

"No," Rieux said quietly, they weren't so bad as that. He had put the question solely to find out if Rambert could or couldn't state the facts without paltering with the truth. "I've no use for statements in which something is kept back," he added. "That is why I shall not furnish information in support of yours."

The journalist smiled. "You talk the language of Saint-Just."

Without raising his voice Rieux said he knew nothing about that. The language he used was that of a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in—though he had much liking for his fellow men—and had resolved, for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.

His shoulders hunched, Rambert gazed at the doctor for some moments without speaking. Then, "I think I understand you," he said, getting up from his chair.

The doctor accompanied him to the door.

"It's good of you to take it like that," he said.

"Yes, yes, I understand," Rambert repeated, with what

seemed a hint of impatience in his voice. "Sorry to have troubled you."

When shaking hands with him, Rieux suggested that if he was out for curious stories for his paper, he might say something about the extraordinary number of dead rats that were being found in the town just now.

"Ah!" Rambert exclaimed. "That certainly interests me."

On his way out at five for another round of visits, the doctor passed on the stairway a stocky, youngish man, with a big, deeply furrowed face and bushy eyebrows. He had met him once or twice in the top-floor apartment, which was occupied by some male Spanish dancers. Puffing a cigarette, Jean Tarrou was gazing down at the convulsions of a rat dying on the step in front of him. He looked up, and his gray eyes remained fixed on the doctor for some moments; then, after wishing him good day, he remarked that it was rather odd, the way all these rats were coming out of their holes to die.

"Very odd," Rieux agreed, "and it ends by getting on one's nerves."

"In a way, Doctor, only in a way. We've not seen anything of the sort before, that's all. Personally I find it interesting, yes, definitely interesting."

Tarrou ran his fingers through his hair to brush it off his forehead, looking again at the rat, which had now stopped moving, then smiled toward Rieux.

"But really, Doctor, it's the concierge's headache, isn't it?"

As it so happened, the concierge was the next person Rieux encountered. He was leaning against the wall beside the street door; he was looking tired and his normally rubicund face had lost its color.

"Yes, I know," the old man told Rieux, who had informed him of the latest casualty among the rats. "I keep finding 'em

by twos and threes. But it's the same thing in the other houses in the street."

He seemed depressed and worried, and was scratching his neck absentmindedly. Rieux asked him how he felt. The concierge wouldn't go so far as to say he was feeling ill. Still he wasn't quite up to the mark. In his opinion it was just due to worry; these damned rats had given him "a shock, like." It would be a relief when they stopped coming out and dying all over the place.

Next morning—it was April 18—when the doctor was bringing back his mother from the station, he found M. Michel looking still more out of sorts. The stairway from the cellar to the attics was strewn with dead rats, ten or a dozen of them. The garbage cans of all the houses in the street were full of rats.

The doctor's mother took it quite calmly.

"It's like that sometimes," she said vaguely. She was a small woman with silver hair and dark, gentle eyes. "I'm so glad to be with you again, Bernard," she added. "The rats can't change *that*, anyhow."

He nodded. It was a fact that everything seemed easy when she was there.

However, he rang up the Municipal Office. He knew the man in charge of the department concerned with the extermination of vermin and he asked him if he'd heard about all the rats that were coming out to die in the open. Yes, Mercier knew all about it; in fact, fifty rats had been found in his offices, which were near the wharves. To tell the truth, he was rather perturbed; did the doctor think it meant anything serious? Rieux couldn't give a definite opinion, but he thought the sanitary service should take action of some kind.

Mercier agreed. "And, if you think it's really worth the trouble, I'll get an order issued as well."

"It certainly is worth the trouble," Rieux replied.

His charwoman had just told him that several hundred dead rats had been collected in the big factory where her husband worked.

It was about this time that our townsmen began to show signs of uneasiness. For, from April 18 onwards, quantities of dead or dying rats were found in factories and warehouses. In some cases the animals were killed to put an end to their agony. From the outer suburbs to the center of the town, in all the byways where the doctor's duties took him, in every thoroughfare, rats were piled up in garbage cans or lying in long lines in the gutters. The evening papers that day took up the matter and inquired whether or not the city fathers were going to take steps, and what emergency measures were contemplated, to abate this particularly disgusting nuisance. Actually the municipality had not contemplated doing anything at all, but now a meeting was convened to discuss the situation. An order was transmitted to the sanitary service to collect the dead rats at daybreak every morning. When the rats had been collected, two municipal trucks were to take them to be burned in the town incinerator.

But the situation worsened in the following days. There were more and more dead vermin in the streets, and the collectors had bigger truckloads every morning. On the fourth day the rats began to come out and die in batches. From basements, cellars, and sewers they emerged in long wavering files into the light of day, swayed helplessly, then did a sort of pirouette and fell dead at the feet of the horrified onlookers. At night, in passages and alleys, their shrill little death-cries could be clearly heard. In the mornings the bodies were found lining the gutters, each with a gout of blood, like a red flower, on its tapering muzzle; some were bloated and already beginning to rot, others rigid, with their whiskers still erect. Even

in the busy heart of the town you found them piled in little heaps on landings and in backyards. Some stole forth to die singly in the halls of public offices, in school playgrounds, and even on café terraces. Our townsfolk were amazed to find such busy centers as the Place d'Armes, the boulevards, the promenade along the waterfront, dotted with repulsive little corpses. After the daily clean-up of the town, which took place at sunrise, there was a brief respite; then gradually the rats began to appear again in numbers that went on increasing throughout the day. People out at night would often feel underfoot the squelchy roundness of a still-warm body. It was as if the earth on which our houses stood were being purged of its secreted humors; thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that had been forming in its entrails. You must picture the consternation of our little town, hitherto so tranquil, and now, out of the blue, shaken to its core, like a quite healthy man who all of a sudden feels his temperature shoot up and the blood seething like wildfire in his veins.

Things went so far that the Ransdoc Information Bureau (inquiries on all subjects promptly and accurately answered), which ran a free-information talk on the radio, by way of publicity, began its talk by announcing that no less than 6,231 rats had been collected and burned in a single day, April 25. Giving as it did an ampler and more precise view of the scene daily enacted before our eyes, this amazing figure administered a jolt to the public nerves. Hitherto people had merely grumbled at a stupid, rather obnoxious visitation; they now realized that this strange phenomenon, whose scope could not be measured and whose origins escaped detection, had something vaguely menacing about it. Only the old Spaniard whom Dr. Rieux was treating for asthma went on rubbing



his hands and chuckling: "They're coming out, they're coming out," with senile glee.

On April 28, when the Ransdoc Bureau announced that 8,000 rats had been collected, a wave of something like panic swept the town. There was a demand for drastic measures, the authorities were accused of slackness, and people who had houses on the coast spoke of moving there, early in the year though it was. But next day the bureau informed them that the phenomenon had abruptly ended and the sanitary service had collected only a trifling number of rats. Everyone breathed more freely.

It was, however, on this same day, at noon, that Dr. Rieux, when parking his car in front of the apartment house where he lived, noticed the concierge coming toward him from the end of the street. He was dragging himself along, his head bent, arms and legs curiously splayed out, with the jerky movements of a clockwork doll. The old man was leaning on the arm of a priest whom the doctor knew. It was Father Paneloux, a learned and militant Jesuit, whom he had met occasionally and who was very highly thought of in our town, even in circles quite indifferent to religion. Rieux waited for the two men to draw up to him. M. Michel's eyes were fever-bright and he was breathing wheezily. The old man explained that, feeling "a bit off color," he had gone out to take the air. But he had started feeling pains in all sorts of places—in his neck, armpits, and groin—and had been obliged to turn back and ask Father Paneloux to give him an arm.

"It's just swellings," he said. "I must have strained myself somehow."

Leaning out of the window of the car, the doctor ran his hand over the base of Michel's neck; a hard lump, like a knot in wood, had formed there.

"Go to bed at once, and take your temperature. I'll come to see you this afternoon."

When the old man had gone, Rieux asked Father Paneoux what he made of this queer business about the rats.

"Oh, I suppose it's an epidemic they've been having." The Father's eyes were smiling behind his big round glasses.

After lunch, while Rieux was reading for the second time the telegram his wife had sent him from the sanatorium, announcing her arrival, the phone rang. It was one of his former patients, a clerk in the Municipal Office, ringing him up. He had suffered for a long time from a constriction of the aorta, and, as he was poor, Rieux had charged no fee.

"Thanks, Doctor, for remembering me. But this time it's somebody else. The man next door has had an accident. Please come at once." He sounded out of breath.

Rieux thought quickly; yes, he could see the concierge afterwards. A few minutes later he was entering a small house in the rue Faidherbe, on the outskirts of the town. Halfway up the drafty, foul-smelling stairs, he saw Joseph Grand, the clerk, hurrying down to meet him. He was a man of about fifty years of age, tall and drooping, with narrow shoulders, thin limbs, and a yellowish mustache.

"He looks better now," he told Rieux, "but I really thought his number was up." He blew his nose vigorously.

On the top floor, the third, Rieux noticed something scrawled in red chalk on a door on the left: *Come in, I've hanged myself.*

They entered the room. A rope dangled from a hanging lamp above a chair lying on its side. The dining-room table had been pushed into a corner. But the rope hung empty.

"I got him down just in time." Grand seemed always to have trouble in finding his words, though he expressed himself in the simplest possible way. "I was going out and I heard

a noise. When I saw that writing on the door, I thought it was a—a prank. Only, then I heard a funny sort of groan; it made my blood run cold, as they say.” He scratched his head. “That must be a painful way of—of doing it, I should think. Naturally I went in.”

Grand had opened a door and they were standing on the threshold of a bright but scantily furnished bedroom. There was a brass bedstead against one of the walls, and a plump little man was lying there, breathing heavily. He gazed at them with bloodshot eyes. Rieux stopped short. In the intervals of the man’s breathing he seemed to hear the little squeals of rats. But he couldn’t see anything moving in the corners of the room. Then he went to the bedside. Evidently the man had not fallen from a sufficient height, or very suddenly, for the collar-bone had held. Naturally there was some asphyxia. An X-ray photograph would be needed. Meanwhile the doctor gave him a camphor injection and assured him he would be all right in a few days.

“Thanks, Doctor,” the man mumbled.

When Rieux asked Grand if he had notified the police, he hung his head.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I haven’t. The first thing I thought, was to—”

“Quite so,” Rieux cut in. “I’ll see to it.”

But the invalid made a fretful gesture and sat up in bed. He felt much better, he explained; really it wasn’t worth the trouble.

“Don’t feel alarmed,” Rieux said. “It’s little more than a formality. Anyhow, I have to report this to the police.”

“Oh!” The man slumped back on the bed and started sobbing weakly.

Grand, who had been twiddling his mustache while they were speaking, went up to the bed.

"Come, Monsieur Cottard," he said. "Try to understand. People could say the doctor was to blame, if you took it into your head to have another shot at it."

Cottard assured him tearfully that there wasn't the least risk of that; he'd had a sort of crazy fit, but it had passed and all he wanted now was to be left in peace. Rieux was writing a prescription.

"Very well," he said. "We'll say no more about it for the present. I'll come and see you again in a day or two. But don't do anything silly."

On the landing he told Grand that he was obliged to make a report, but would ask the police inspector to hold up the inquiry for a couple of days.

"But somebody should watch Cottard tonight," he added. "Has he any relations?"

"Not that I know of. But I can very well stay with him. I can't say I really know him, but one's got to help a neighbor, hasn't one?"

As he walked down the stairs Rieux caught himself glancing into the darker corners, and he asked Grand if the rats had quite disappeared in his part of the town.

Grand had no idea. True, he'd heard some talk about rats, but he never paid much attention to gossip like that. "I've other things to think about," he added.

Rieux, who was in a hurry to get away, was already shaking his hand. There was a letter to write to his wife, and he wanted to see the concierge first.

News-venders were shouting the latest news—that the rats had disappeared. But Rieux found his patient leaning over the edge of the bed, one hand pressed to his belly and the other to his neck, vomiting pinkish bile into a slop-pail. After retching for some minutes, the man lay back again, gasping. His temperature was 103, the ganglia of his neck

and limbs were swollen, and two black patches were developing on his thighs. He now complained of internal pains.

"It's like fire," he whimpered. "The bastard's burning me inside."

He could hardly get the words through his fever-crusted lips and he gazed at the doctor with bulging eyes that his headache had suffused with tears. His wife cast an anxious look at Rieux, who said nothing.

"Please, Doctor," she said, "what is it?"

"It might be—almost anything. There's nothing definite as yet. Keep him on a light diet and give him plenty to drink." The sick man had been complaining of a raging thirst.

On returning to his apartment Rieux rang up his colleague Richard, one of the leading practitioners in the town.

"No," Richard said, "I can't say I've noticed anything exceptional."

"No cases of fever with local inflammation?"

"Wait a bit! I have two cases with inflamed ganglia."

"Abnormally so?"

"Well," Richard said, "that depends on what you mean by 'normal.'"

Anyhow, that night the porter was running a temperature of 104 and in delirium, always babbling about "them rats." Rieux tried a fixation abscess. When he felt the sting of the turpentine, the old man yelled: "The bastards!"

The ganglia had become still larger and felt like lumps of solid fibrous matter embedded in the flesh. Mme. Michel had completely broken down.

"Sit up with him," the doctor said, "and call me if necessary."

Next day, April 30, the sky was blue and slightly misty. A warm, gentle breeze was blowing, bringing with it a smell of flowers from the outlying suburbs. The morning noises of

the streets sounded louder, gayer than usual. For everyone in our little town this day brought the promise of a new lease on life, now that the shadow of fear under which they had been living for a week had lifted. Rieux, too, was in an optimistic mood when he went down to see the concierge; he had been cheered up by a letter from his wife that had come with the first mail.

Old M. Michel's temperature had gone down to 99 and, though he still looked very weak, he was smiling.

"He's better, Doctor, isn't he?" his wife inquired.

"Well, it's a bit too early to say."

At noon the sick man's temperature shot up abruptly to 104, he was in constant delirium and had started vomiting again. The ganglia in the neck were painful to the touch, and the old man seemed to be straining to hold his head as far as possible from his body. His wife sat at the foot of the bed, her hands on the counterpane, gently clasping his feet. She gazed at Rieux imploringly.

"Listen," he said, "we'll have to move him to a hospital and try a special treatment. I'll ring up for the ambulance."

Two hours later the doctor and Mme. Michel were in the ambulance bending over the sick man. Rambling words were issuing from the gaping mouth, thickly coated now with sordes. He kept on repeating: "Them rats! Them damned rats!" His face had gone livid, a grayish green, his lips were bloodless, his breath came in sudden gasps. His limbs spread out by the ganglia, embedded in the berth as if he were trying to bury himself in it or a voice from the depths of the earth were summoning him below, the unhappy man seemed to be stifling under some unseen pressure. His wife was sobbing.

"Isn't there any hope left, Doctor?"

"He's dead," said Rieux.

Michel's death marked, one might say, the end of the first period, that of bewildering portents, and the beginning of another, relatively more trying, in which the perplexity of the early days gradually gave place to panic. Reviewing that first phase in the light of subsequent events, our townsfolk realized that they had never dreamed it possible that our little town should be chosen out for the scene of such grotesque happenings as the wholesale death of rats in broad daylight or the decease of concierges through exotic maladies. In this respect they were wrong, and their views obviously called for revision. Still, if things had gone thus far and no farther, force of habit would doubtless have gained the day, as usual. But other members of our community, not all menials or poor people, were to follow the path down which M. Michel had led the way. And it was then that fear, and with fear serious reflection, began.

However, before entering on a detailed account of the next phase, the narrator proposes to give the opinion of another witness on the period that has been described. Jean Tarrou, whose acquaintance we have already made at the beginning of this narrative, had come to Oran some weeks before and was staying in a big hotel in the center of the town. Apparently he had private means and was not engaged in business. But though he gradually became a familiar figure in our midst, no one knew where he hailed from or what had brought him to Oran. He was often to be seen in public and at the beginning of spring was seen on one or other of the

beaches almost every day; obviously he was fond of swimming. Good-humored, always ready with a smile, he seemed an addict of all normal pleasures without being their slave. In fact, the only habit he was known to have was that of cultivating the society of the Spanish dancers and musicians who abound in our town.

His notebooks comprise a sort of chronicle of those strange early days we all lived through. But an unusual type of chronicle, since the writer seems to make a point of understatement, and at first sight we might almost imagine that Tarrou had a habit of observing events and people through the wrong end of a telescope. In those chaotic times he set himself to recording the history of what the normal historian passes over. Obviously we may deplore this curious kink in his character and suspect in him a lack of proper feeling. All the same, it is undeniable that these notebooks, which form a sort of discursive diary, supply the chronicler of the period with a host of seemingly trivial details which yet have their importance, and whose very oddity should be enough to prevent the reader from passing hasty judgment on this singular man.

The earliest entries made by Jean Tarrou synchronize with his coming to Oran. From the outset they reveal a paradoxical satisfaction at the discovery of a town so intrinsically ugly. We find in them a minute description of the two bronze lions adorning the Municipal Office, and appropriate comments on the lack of trees, the hideousness of the houses, and the absurd lay-out of the town. Tarrou sprinkles his descriptions with bits of conversation overheard in streetcars and in the streets, never adding a comment on them except—this comes somewhat later—in the report of a dialogue concerning a man named Camps. It was a chat between two streetcar conductors.

“You knew Camps, didn’t you?” asked one of them.



"Camps? A tall chap with a black mustache?"

"That's him. A switchman."

"Ah yes, I remember now."

"Well, he's dead."

"Oh? When did he die?"

"After that business about the rats."

"You don't say so! What did he die of?"

"I couldn't say exactly. Some kind of fever. Of course, he never was what you might call fit. He got abscesses under the arms, and they did him in, it seems."

"Still, he didn't look that different from other people."

"I wouldn't say that. He had a weak chest and he used to play the trombone in the town band. It's hard on the lungs, blowing a trombone."

"Ah, if you've got weak lungs, it don't do you any good, blowing down a big instrument like that."

After jotting down this dialogue Tarrou went on to speculate why Camps had joined a band when it was so clearly inadvisable, and what obscure motive had led him to risk his life for the sake of parading the streets on Sunday mornings.

We gather that Tarrou was agreeably impressed by a little scene that took place daily on the balcony of a house facing his window. His room at the hotel looked on to a small side street and there were always several cats sleeping in the shadow of the walls. Every day, soon after lunch, at a time when most people stayed indoors, enjoying a siesta, a dapper little old man stepped out on the balcony on the other side of the street. He had a soldierly bearing, very erect, and affected a military style of dressing; his snow-white hair was always brushed to perfect smoothness. Leaning over the balcony he would call: "Pussy! Pussy!" in a voice at once haughty and endearing. The cats blinked up at him with sleep-pale eyes, but made no move as yet. He then proceeded to tear

some paper into scraps and let them fall into the street; interested by the fluttering shower of white butterflies, the cats came forward, lifting tentative paws toward the last scraps of paper. Then, taking careful aim, the old man would spit vigorously at the cats and, whenever a liquid missile hit the quarry, would beam with delight.

Lastly, Tarrou seemed to have been quite fascinated by the commercial character of the town, whose aspect, activities, and even pleasures all seemed to be dictated by considerations of business. This idiosyncrasy—the term he uses in his diary—was warmly approved of by Tarrou; indeed, one of his appreciative comments ends on the exclamation: “At last!”

These are the only passages in which our visitor’s record, at this period, strikes a seemingly personal note. Its significance and the earnestness behind it might escape the reader on a casual perusal. For example, after describing how the discovery of a dead rat led the hotel cashier to make an error in his bill, Tarrou added: “*Query*: How contrive not to waste one’s time? *Answer*: By being fully aware of it all the while. *Ways in which this can be done*: By spending one’s days on an uneasy chair in a dentist’s waiting-room; by remaining on one’s balcony all of a Sunday afternoon; by listening to lectures in a language one doesn’t know; by traveling by the longest and least-convenient train routes, and of course standing all the way; by lining up at the box-office of theaters and then not buying a seat; and so forth.”

Then, immediately following these eccentricities of thought and expression, we come on a detailed description of the streetcar service in the town, the structure of the cars, their indeterminate color, their unvarying dirtiness—and he concludes his observations with a “Very odd,” which explains nothing.

So much by the way of introduction to Tarrou's comments on the phenomenon of the rats.

"The little old fellow opposite is quite disconsolate today. There are no more cats. The sight of all those dead rats strewn about the street may have excited their hunting instinct; anyhow, they all have vanished. To my thinking, there's no question of their eating the dead rats. Mine, I remember, turned up their noses at dead things. All the same, they're probably busy hunting in the cellars—hence the old boy's plight. His hair isn't as well brushed as usual, and he looks less alert, less military. You can see he is worried. After a few moments he went back into the room. But first he spat once—on emptiness.

"In town today a streetcar was stopped because a dead rat had been found in it. (*Query*: How did it get there?) Two or three women promptly alighted. The rat was thrown out. The car went on.

"The night watchman at the hotel, a level-headed man, assured me that all these rats meant trouble coming. 'When the rats leave a ship . . .' I replied that this held good for ships, but for towns it hadn't yet been demonstrated. But he stuck to his point. I asked what sort of 'trouble' we might expect. That he couldn't say; disasters always come out of the blue. But he wouldn't be surprised if there were an earthquake brewing. I admitted that was possible, and then he asked if the prospect didn't alarm me.

" 'The only thing I'm interested in,' I told him, 'is acquiring peace of mind.'

"He understood me perfectly.

"I find a family that has its meals in this hotel quite interesting. The father is a tall, thin man, always dressed in black and wearing a starched collar. The top of his head is bald, with two tufts of gray hair on each side. His small,

beady eyes, narrow nose, and hard, straight mouth make him look like a well-brought-up owl. He is always first at the door of the restaurant, stands aside to let his wife—a tiny woman, like a black mouse—go in, and then comes in himself with a small boy and girl, dressed like performing poodles, at his heels. When they are at the table he remains standing till his wife is seated and only then the two poodles can perch themselves on their chairs. He uses no terms of endearment to his family, addresses politely spiteful remarks to his wife, and bluntly tells the kids what he thinks of them.

“ ‘Nicole, you’re behaving quite disgracefully.’

“The little girl is on the brink of tears—which is as it should be.

“This morning the small boy was all excitement about the rats, and started saying something on the subject.

“ ‘Philippe, one doesn’t talk of rats at table. For the future I forbid you to use the word.’

“ ‘Your father’s right,’ approved the mouse.

“The two poodles buried their noses in their plates, and the owl acknowledged thanks by a curt, perfunctory nod.

“This excellent example notwithstanding, everybody in town is talking about the rats, and the local newspaper has taken a hand. The town-topics column, usually very varied, is now devoted exclusively to a campaign against the local authorities. ‘Are our city fathers aware that the decaying bodies of these rodents constitute a grave danger to the population?’ The manager of the hotel can talk of nothing else. But he has a personal grievance, too; that dead rats should be found in the elevator of a three-star hotel seems to him the end of all things. To console him, I said: ‘But, you know, everybody’s in the same boat.’

“ ‘That’s just it,’ he replied. ‘Now we’re like everybody else.’

"He was the first to tell me about the outbreak of this queer kind of fever which is causing much alarm. One of his chambermaids has got it.

"'But I feel sure it's not contagious,' he hastened to assure me.

"I told him it was all the same to me.

"'Ah, I understand, sir. You're like me, you're a fatalist.'

"I had said nothing of the kind and, what's more, am not a fatalist. I told him so. . . ."

From this point onwards Tarrou's entries deal in some detail with the curious fever that was causing much anxiety among the public. When noting that the little old man, now that the rats had ceased appearing, had regained his cats and was studiously perfecting his shooting, Tarrou adds that a dozen or so cases of this fever were known to have occurred, and most had ended fatally.

For the light it may throw on the narrative that follows, Tarrou's description of Dr. Rieux may be suitably inserted here. So far as the narrator can judge, it is fairly accurate.

"Looks about thirty-five. Moderate height. Broad shoulders. Almost rectangular face. Dark, steady eyes, but prominent jaws. A biggish, well-modeled nose. Black hair, cropped very close. A curving mouth with thick, usually tight-set lips. With his tanned skin, the black down on his hands and arms, the dark but becoming suits he always wears, he reminds one of a Sicilian peasant.

"He walks quickly. When crossing a street, he steps off the sidewalk without changing his pace, but two out of three times makes a little hop when he steps on to the sidewalk on the other side. He is absentminded and, when driving his car, often leaves his side-signals on after he has turned a corner. Always bareheaded. Looks knowledgeable."

Tarrou's figures were correct. Dr. Rieux was only too well aware of the serious turn things had taken. After seeing to the isolation of the concierge's body, he had rung up Richard and asked what he made of these inguinal-fever cases.

"I can make nothing of them," Richard confessed. "There have been two deaths, one in forty-eight hours, the other in three days. And the second patient showed all the signs of convalescence when I visited him on the second day."

"Please let me know if you have other cases," Rieux said.

He rang up some other colleagues. As a result of these inquiries he gathered that there had been some twenty cases of the same type within the last few days. Almost all had ended fatally. He then advised Richard, who was chairman of the local Medical Association, to have any fresh cases put into isolation wards.

"Sorry," Richard said, "but I can't do anything about it. An order to that effect can be issued only by the Prefect. Anyhow, what grounds have you for supposing there's danger of contagion?"

"No definite grounds. But the symptoms are definitely alarming."

Richard, however, repeated that "such measures were outside his province." The most he could do was to put the matter up to the Prefect.

But while these talks were going on, the weather changed for the worse. On the day following old Michel's death the sky clouded up and there were brief torrential downpours,

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